# the broken heart at the center of comics

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# comics will break your heart.

It’s hard to imagine a working comics professional who hasn’t heard Jack Kirby’s famous words. Many of us have surely felt it: the creaking and groaning in our hearts and joints; the echoes of strain prolonged far beyond the end date of any given project; the warning signs of a tension so deep and burning and taut that it threatens to snap us irreparably. Perhaps you’ve felt it too. Perhaps you know that this is “burnout.”

Burnout is a staple of contemporary life, it seems. I don't know anyone who hasn't experienced severe burnout. Article after article, essay after essay about burnout—and this is another such essay. Visual arts and burnout have a unique relationship, and the comics field has received a particularly short stick in the draw.

I want to be clear, though: this essay does not contain tips on how to combat burnout. I have no anti-burnout artillery for you. I have no shield generators to protect your work-life-health balance. I don't even have a stealthy speedboat to help you get away from it all.

Burnout is not an individual problem; it is an industry-wide problem and a society-wide problem. It's a shadow cast from the canopy of a vast tree with countless branches. It's a money tree, but I'm not talking Neopets.

In the current comics industry, a few of

those branches tend to dictate the shape of our burnout:

- ◊ Devaluation and disrespect of comic creators' labor, especially that of cartoonists/artists.
- ◊ Lack of care for the craft of comics, particularly from traditional book publishers.
- ◊ Most of all, exploitative working conditions and harmful labor expectations.

These branches, intertwined and melded in places, create an environment of intense pressure and toxicity that is nearly impossible to escape or mitigate when you're a freelancer living paycheck-to-paycheck. The financial instability of working as a freelance comics creator is multiplied by the reality that professional comics work pays extremely little, no matter what part of the industry you're in. If you don't have a substantial safety net, you have to work constantly to make ends meet.

To top it all off, how much you're paid (or whether you're paid, or whether you get jobs at all) is ultimately up to how publishers perceive you. How can you demand a livable wage for yourself and your peers when publishers might deem you "hard to work with" and move along to the next cartoonist who's willing to take a lower wage? What if a publisher internally decides your work is more difficult to market because you're Black, and therefore offers you less money than your non-Black peers for the same quantity and quality of work?

This isn't conjecture; these are real occurrences in comics publishing and elsewhere. Many of the decisions that push people out of comics——and into profound burnout——stem from crunching the numbers, from graphs pointing upwards not quite steeply enough, from crisply tailored suit pockets being a little fuller if budgets are just a little smaller.

That's okay, right? You'll still take the

book deal? You love comics. Nobody's in it for the money.

It's the unfortunate truth. We love comics so very much. We want to hold our art out to the world, and we want to connect with others. We want to see the fruits of our labor, love, and investment—emotional, physical, and financial. We have dreams, and publishing claims to deal in dreams.

## LET'S TAKE A MOMENT TO DO SOME MATH:

Let's say you get a graphic novel offer from a major book publisher: $40k advance for 200 pages, after your agent negotiates it up. $200 per page, and you get royalties. Nice! Except the advance is split into four payments: signing, sketches, final art, and publication. That means you have to complete the book on $20k, and you have to complete it quickly enough that your money from the first two payments doesn't run out before you get

the third payment. But wait, your agent gets their 15% commission. And you need to put money away for self-employment taxes. 30% should be enough.

Now each payment is $5,950. Monthly cost of living can vary wildly—but let's say you live in the US and your monthly housing and living expenses are $1,500. You can script, thumbnail, revise, and pencil 200 pages in 3-4 months, right? You do it, at a notable cost to your health. The publisher takes a month to send you notes on pencils...and takes a month to pay you. Or maybe they take two months to pay you. You have to get a part-time job (or maybe two), despite your poor health, because you are poor, unsalaried, and you don't have any family who can lend you money. But you still have to make that final art deadline on top of your new health problems and your part-time jobs.

You finish your book.

You heave a sigh of numb relief.

Ahead of your book's release date, you notice that the publisher doesn't seem particularly interested in marketing your book.

So much for royalties.

## Cartoonist and illustrator SUNMI speaks on this:

People seem to think I should be grateful for "getting the book deal," "getting the dream job," and "getting to make my own comics" when as an adult, every opportunity I chased became less and less ideal, and nothing more than just a way to stay alive another year. Even "my debut YA book" became another job. And every job I work, comics-related or not, has only put me further into debt, further into burnout, further physically disabled, and immunocompromised.

I'm on Medicaid, SNAP, and CareCredit for

dental procedures I couldn't afford. I have had landlords refuse to rent to me because they saw my "book deal" for what it is: an unreliable source of income. Yet these publishers' demanding schedules would not let me work other jobs alongside drawing comics. I found myself in a catch-22 of falling behind on deadlines or falling behind on bills while working multiple jobs and still falling behind regardless.

The way that my "queer Korean immigrant" experience became fetishized and simplified by publishers, turned out to be just as horrifying as being ground into pulp by their unrealistic timelines and lack of concern for my health and integrity as an artist. Why do I have to thank corporations for just seeing me as nothing but another source of profit? I simply don't believe in a metric or illusion of success.

Instead, I am continually being compared to people's illusions of what being "successful in comics" means. The only thing that has

made it worth it to continue drawing and reading comics is the genuine camaraderie I have found with the artists who understand the broken system. Artists who approach their practices with an anti-corporate and, honestly, even spiritual mindset.

The beauty of connecting with other people through art has never been lost on me. The rest of my broken body and mind does beg to differ.

Sunmi touches on the source of many comic creators' negative experiences with comics publishing: corporations seeing graphic novels as a source of profit, all while touting the lie that graphic novelists should be grateful that they're being published in the first place.

The enormous boom in the kids' graphic novel industry, following the resounding success of books like *Dog Man* and *Smile*, has led to increased interest in graphic novels from

traditional book publishing. Everyone wants a piece of the pie...but they're not too interested in how the pie is made, what a reasonable timeline would be for making the pie, or what livable working conditions would be for the bakers.

They want graphic novels quickly and cheaply.

Because of the rapid entry many publishers and imprints had into the graphic novel market, there is often a lack of in-house experience when it comes to the graphic novel process. This creates nightmarish conditions for graphic novel creators, especially artists. Artists are forced to take on more responsibilities than they bargained for, and timelines are rarely accommodating.

## Cartoonist SHANNON WRIGHT shares their experience too:

Burnout started during my illustration career and only worsened. My seams started to unravel early on, and no matter how much I went back to mend those loose ends, the garment only deteriorated more. It eventually got to a point where my desire to care dwindled, so I began to shift toward my other love: comics.

And that's where I broke.

Comics broke me in a way I'm still having to deal with to this day. The burnout I've been facing from it is similar to that of a bully who leaves unrepentant damage that follows you years down the road. The burnout I experienced from my first graphic novel left me feeling like a shell of myself.

Like a tear in a dress, it started small. Annoying, but ultimately manageable...or so I thought. It presented itself out the

gate with poor time-management for the initial script.

The next tear occurred when, after finally getting a script months past the original contracted deadline, I had to assume the role of second editor. I was the only one who had hands-on experience making a comic, and it showed when we started with a lack of in-depth character and world-building notes.

“Where does the story take place?”
“What are the characteristics of everyone?”
“What does the supporting cast look like beyond *diverse*?”

These were questions I needed to be answered so I could properly begin.

More tears came along the way: tears from life and mishaps that nobody can predict. But the final rip came from constant crunching. I ultimately expedited the whole comics process in nine months. I was tasked to do two years of work in less than half that

time. This precious thing I cared so much about had to be done, even if it left me broken, tired, and unrecognizable.

Even after it was completed and I held this beautiful garment in my hands, I don't think I've ever truly been able to celebrate to the extent I wanted to.

The whole process left me feeling like my work was for naught, and it left me mentally and physically absent during and after. The whole thing heightened my anxiety (which I got diagnosed and medicated for), it filled me with a type of resentment that could torch the world ten-fold. It robbed me of any kind of hope I had for my own stories for a long while. I had poured so much of myself into comics, and it left me with a disgusting hole in my chest. And because of that, I just stopped.

Stopped caring.
Stopped participating.
Stopped doing.

I stopped making illustrations and comics with any type of urgency, and any projects I did manage to do felt like I was trudging through sludge. I caught myself having mini panic attacks even thinking about trying again. I'd cry from frustration, cry from my inability to meet simple deadlines, and cry from my own avoidance of creative wants and desires.

It's only recently that I've found myself dreaming with tangible actions behind them, and that was only made possible by completely separating myself from art for a large chunk of time. That love started to return when I reached into other avenues and interests.

And while I'm not quite there yet, I've begun to look back on my first graphic novel with less searing heat, because I'm certain I'll create a new and updated pattern for the garment of my dreams.

Shannon's experience is not uncommon. I can't count how many cartoonists I know who have been screwed over by publishers at a direct and tangible cost to their health, well-being, and livelihoods. Most of them don't talk about it, because speaking up would affect their ability to make a living. (Remember "hard to work with"?)

Comics creators are afraid of repercussions (rightfully so) and publishing executives benefit greatly from that. They benefit greatly from all of this. Money goes where money is. That's how capitalism works, and capitalism is where all of these branches of exploitation and burnout are born.

Capitalism is the writhing root system of it all.

Burnout is a natural byproduct of the furious, never-ending need to make as much money as possible. This ultimate consumption, this not-enough-need-more hoarding of wealth that defines our current global economy is in

direct opposition to the fundamental human relationship to art and storytelling.

Capitalism cannot fuel art, and it cannot nurture art—it can only strangle it into conformity, into singing in perfect harmony with the people who have enough money and resources to have their voices heard. Art existed long before capitalism. It existed long before society, and so did storytelling.

Why do we tell stories?
Why do we want stories?
Why do we need stories?

That is the heart at the center of comics.

That heart has been broken countless times, in countless people. Maybe those people don't make comics anymore. If they're unlucky, they have no choice but to keep making comics. Or maybe, if they're lucky, they reconnect with themselves creatively, away from the comics industry.

# Let's hear from LILLIE J. HARRIS on their experience with burnout:

If we were to imagine it, what would it feel like to create beyond burnout or without the fear of eventually falling back into it? And what have I attempted to gain by seeking out other forms of creation outside of visual art?

The way that comics burnout revealed itself in my life was through an unrelenting sense of disconnectedness. Due to underhanded behavior from those at the helm of my alma mater, I decided to cut all ties with my school after graduating in 2021. I both was, and felt, completely isolated from comics as a community at that time.

Beyond the intensity of that split, finishing my first graphic novel within an eight months span had exhausted me physically as well. I was compelled to keep up the discipline and

momentum I had fostered during my thesis year, but was too hollowed out to even consider making a comic in the near future again. Before I had even realized it, burnout had made itself home in my life.

So, I did things that weren't at all related to comics, or even visual art in general. Because my full-time career is not in comics, I had the space to take a step back from the hurt and stretch my creativity in uncharted directions.

The process was still deeply destabilizing, but undoubtedly would've been even worse had my livelihood been on the line alongside my sense of self. How can we expect full-time freelancers to heal from what is enacted on them throughout this industry when such a reprieve can't be taken? I believe this is by design.

I've found that, for me, the (capitalistic) expectation to "master" a skill doesn't show up in such an all-consuming way when I

explore outside of the visual art field. For example, there can be practical advantages to learning a new language, yes—but what inspired me to begin to learn American Sign Language, and eventually gain some fluency, did not stem from a desire to interpret it. The same can be said for learning banjo; another non-visual art related hobby I allowed myself to experience throughout my burnout.

In these instances of self-directed play and mental stimulation, there was no previous barometer to hold myself to; no external audience to judge my progress in a way that was at all tied to a former sense of self.

There are, unfortunately, numerous instances of burnout happening to marginalized creators that revolve around pay discrepancies within the industry—publishers not paying artists what they're worth, or forgetting to even pay them at all.

That said, my personal burnout came more from

a place of disconnect within my own community. So if I were to profess to be fluent in ASL, or begin to call myself a musician, would burnout inevitably return? The commodification of passion often leads to burnout, but does self-identifying with a passion also result in the same?

Thinking critically about my own burnout has allowed me to analyze what lies on the other side of it; to sit with all that has been healed and what all may have been irreparably shifted.

I used to say, and still catch myself saying from time to time, that “I don’t draw as often as I’d like to.” I don’t think that’s true, though. Maybe, divorced from the external expectations I hold myself to, I actually draw exactly as often as I want.

How can we each navigate our individual creative journeys? How do we find what works for each of us? How do we stop burnout? How do we reconnect?

How do we heal?

I don't know. I don't have the answer. I can't offer a solution.

But I can offer a story.

*There is a tree, the largest in the world.*
*Its leaves hold gems aloft, casting prisms*
*across the night sky. We live in its*
*branches—though "live" is perhaps a strong*
*word. Its form is massive, and its reach is*
*infinite, but its roots have always been*
*shallow. The tree is young, you see.*
*We have something much older with us.*

*We decide, one day, when we have truly had*
*enough, to wrest ourselves from its thicket*
*of thorns. We climb all the way down its*
*trunk. We are afraid, and we are cold.*

*(The tree's canopy hoards sunlight, of*
*course. What else lights up those gems?)*
*We are greeted at the bottom by other people,*
*whose resistance against this parasitic tree*
*has spanned centuries. Maybe our numbers are*
*strong enough now, they say.*

*So we dig it up. Little by little.*
*All together. One shallow root at a time.*
*The tree falls. It cracks continents in half.*
*But we can see the stars.*

*We're still cold, but you know what?*
*There's so much lumber now.*

*Does anyone know how to make a campfire?*
*Let's cook some stew. Let's make s'mores.*

*The warmth of the fire feels familiar.*
*Far away, long ago.*

*Who wants to tell a story?*

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Ashanti Fortson is a Baltimore-based cartoonist, illustrator, and writer interested in textiles and the rifts and connections between people.

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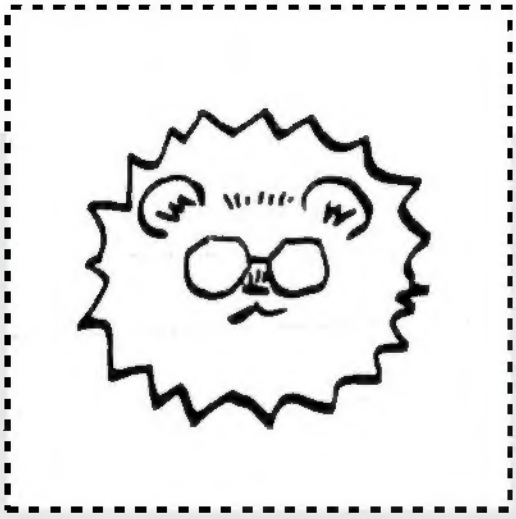

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*Self-publishing forever.*